

IN CONVERSATION: PEADAR KING WITH ROBERT FISK



Robert Fisk (left) and Peadar King (right). Dalkey, 18 December 2018. Stephen McCloskey. All rights reserved.

The following is a transcript of an interview carried out by broadcaster and film-maker Peadar King with Robert Fisk, Middle-East correspondent with *The Independent* newspaper. The interview was conducted on 18 December 2018

as part of a documentary on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon produced for the series *What in the World?* The transcript has been reproduced in *Policy and Practice* with the kind permission of Peadar King and Robert Fisk. The documentary is to be broadcast by RTE One Television at 11.10pm on Tuesday, 14 May 2019.

Peadar King

(PK): Robert could you start by telling us how Palestinians came to be located in Lebanon?

Robert Fisk

(RF): Well the Palestinians came to Lebanon in the same way as they washed up as refugees in Gaza you know and what is now the West Bank. They were driven off, driven from their homes, or fled from their homes in what is now Israel, during the war of 1948/49 when the Israeli state was established and the refugees were living on the land which is now Israel.

They of course call it Palestine and that was their property. They lived on it, they had the deeds to it, they owned it and they were citizens of a mandate, British mandate before the Second World War called Palestine, which of course was composed, too, of both Jews and Arabs. Most of the people of Palestine historically are Arabs and were, indeed, when the original British Balfour declaration said that the British would support a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

So those Palestinians who fled their homes either because of massacres or through sheer fear, fled northwards, say from Galilee, and the Galilean Palestinians ended up in Lebanon, in the south of Lebanon, in Beirut itself in large numbers and in the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon, and they believed of course when they arrived, the original refugees, that in a matter of days or weeks they would return to their homes in Palestine which is why

they kept their land deeds, the keys to their front doors. They were going away for a few days, locked the front door, left everything intact inside their houses, thinking they were going to go back when the war was over.

PK: Many people looking at that scenario, that period in history, they are surprised that the Palestinians were duped so easily into believing that they were leaving Palestine for a short period of time.

RF: Well they weren't duped, no one told them they were fleeing a war, and remember at that period we had the end of the Second World War which occurred in Europe in 1945, you know April/May.

Millions of people were on the roads of Europe, and refugees were a very common phenomena. Refugees in the Middle-East seemed to us in the west like any other refugees, and as we know in Europe in most cases - not in cases for several millions - but in most cases people could return to their homes, and there was a natural assumption that when the war was over you would go back to your home, partly because you thought well maybe the Palestinians or the Arab armies would win, partly because you were looking after your children in a neighbouring county or in a part of your country which wasn't the scene of warfare, and naturally you would go back to your home afterwards.

This was a battle controlled by political people, by different political leaderships and that once this was finished you would return, after all you owned the land. And promises had been made to the Arabs, remember in the First World War, that they would have this vast land between Morocco and Iraq and rule it themselves, but the Palestinians inside Palestine in the years leading up to the Second World War, they feared this would happen, they were well aware they may be dispossessed, which they were. It was an act of dispossession, and once they arrived in Beirut, if you read the diaries of the first arrivals, they clearly believed a matter of weeks, months at the most, and it would be arranged that they could return.

The richer Palestinians, some of them had fled before the war, they knew what was going to happen and they had houses in Lebanon which they owned. Some of them had houses which they actually sold in Palestine, in some cases to Jewish people who took the houses very happily. “It’s going to be part of the Israeli state one day”, they thought, and it was. But by and large those people, remember they were destitute, they had children, they were poor farmers in most cases, most of the Palestinians who came to Lebanon were not wealthy, they were poor people, they were people who had olive groves, were sheep farmers. Some of them came across the border, and you can actually see it in the old filmed photographs, with their animals. They actually got their farm animals and drove them dozens of miles because they thought, well we can use the fields of Lebanon and we can settle there for a little while and then we can go home.

And of course, they didn’t go home and then constantly the international community, the world told them, “oh you will go home”. And then remember we had a UN General Assembly resolution that refugees would return to their homes, but unfortunately General Assembly resolutions of the UN were not, and are not binding, so they did not return to their homes. And the Palestinian refugees became a kind of institution in themselves, and at one point there were 340,000 perhaps, maybe it’s only 140,000 or 150,000 now, but people said “oh well the Palestinians in Lebanon, yeah well, they were refugees from, what was it – 1948, it was after the Second World War wasn’t it?”, and the history began to disappear. They became a permanent feature of the landscape, the geography of Lebanon, except of course to the Christians of Lebanon who feared that the refugees, almost all of them being Muslim, would upset the religious balance in Lebanon and effectively destroy the Christian community and there you have the seeds of the civil war which began in 1975.

PK: But staying in that period, they were the majority of the population in 1946/47 and again a lot of people would find it incomprehensible that the majority of a population can be forcibly removed from their country.

RF: Well I think not, you see, you've got to remember that in 1936 to 1939 there had been a ferocious - well not a civil war really - an Arab uprising against British rule. The Palestinian Arabs of Palestine naturally regarded the British as being the people who had brought upon them this enormous immigration of Jews who at some point were going to set up a state, and they were right in believing that. So, they started an insurrection, partly against Jews of Palestine but also very much against the British.

And so, the British effectively and very brutally repressed that uprising and disarmed the Palestinians, whereas in many cases at that point Jewish settlements in what was Palestine still, were heavily armed and probably had to be because they were being attacked by the Arabs and the British could not dispossess the Jewish inhabitants of Palestine of those weapons. Now after the Second World War the situation reversed itself, and you had a Jewish uprising against British rule in which of course the Palestinians became the dispossessed and the Jews were fighting for their homeland against the Arabs and later the Arab armies.

It's not a simple story but it's not that complicated. At the end of the day Palestine for centuries had an Arab Muslim majority, and after the creation of the state of Israel, that part of Palestine that became Israel had a very small minority of Arabs left.

PK: You mentioned earlier on that other countries made promises to the Palestinian people – specifically what countries made promises: what was the nature of those promises and how did they renege on those promises?

RF: Look, the principal promise that was made was made in one sentence in the Balfour Declaration - it was only one sentence long - in which

the British said they supported a Jewish homeland in Palestine providing this did not affect the civil or existing rights of the existing communities, meaning Arab Muslims, although they didn't say that. The Balfour declaration was issued in the First World War because the British wanted Jewish support against Germany and the Austrian empire and the Austro-Hungarian empire so for short-term aims in 1917, we encouraged the establishment of this entirely new state in the Middle-East most of whose people were millions and millions of Arab Muslims, and as I say, the Arabs realised this was coming.

During the same First World War, the British also promised the Arabs that they would have an Arab independent land between effectively Morocco and Mesopotamia and Persia, Iraq and Iran today. But then there was a special mandate for Palestine, and then once the implications of the Balfour declaration of Jewish homeland were clear, the Arabs / Arab nationalism began to take shape in a different way and said look this is a threat to the Arabs of Palestine, we are going to be driven off our lands, and by the time that the war has ended, I'm talking about the Israeli Arab war, the first one in 1948/49, the Israeli State as it would then become, effectively controlled, well something like 78% of what had been the mandate of Palestine.

That figure changes of course, because of who you believe was ruling Gaza at that period and so on, but of course Jordan first of all annexed the Arab part of what was left of Palestine, and in the end the modern Palestinian history, the history of Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian refugees who are alive now, was fighting to get back 22% of what had been Palestine, and even that's failed completely.

PK: Moving on then to the 1982 Shatila massacre, can you tell me please what happened and about your own personal experience in Shatila at that time?

RF: Look, the Sabra and Shatila massacre was the bloody highlight and climax of Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the purpose of that invasion

- and Israeli scholars, historians, politicians have talked about this - was effectively to end the political Palestinian presence in Lebanon, drive them out, throw them out, send them to Syria, anywhere, but make sure that you have a safe Christian minority presidency allied to Israel.

So, the whole purpose of the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 was effectively to neutralise the Palestinians or to neuter them if you like, just to destroy them as well. And so, when the Christian president elect, Bachir Gemayel, the man who was going to be the chief ally in Lebanon of Israel, was assassinated in a bomb explosion in east Beirut, the Christian Phalange, his own militia, allied and armed and in some cases paid by the Israelis, moved in to the (one bit of Beirut,) the western Muslim Palestinian sector of Beirut which had not been crushed by the Israeli invasion, and then went straight into the camps. They were sent into the Sabra and Shatila camps on the instructions of Ariel Sharon, the (then) Minister of Defence in Israel, who had the previous night actually told the Phalangists that Palestinians had killed Gemayel. They hadn't in fact but that's what he said, and so they went in there with the Israelis watching, and the Israeli Commission of Enquiry made this absolutely clear, that the Israelis watched the massacre happening and did nothing.

The massacre began on a Thursday and it finished on a Saturday mid-day. I arrived on Saturday morning and there was just devastation: flattened houses, exploded buildings, corpses lying in the street, a woman who had been eviscerated, a dead baby beside her, some dead horses. I couldn't figure out why would they kill horses, and then we realised. I was with an American correspondent, and a Norwegian Journalist who was a good friend of mine, and still is today, and we realised we could hear armed vehicles moving and we realised that the Phalangist militia, the murderers, were still in the camp. We at one point ran into the back yard of a hovel, and there was a woman lying on her back and she just had just been killed, there was blood running from her head, and I didn't see her at first, I was hiding behind this iron gate.

We were trying to keep away from the noise of this vehicle we could hear passing only a few meters away, and my colleague said “Robert, behind you”. I looked around, and there was this dead woman and she had obviously stayed in her home when she heard all the shooting of the massacre, and she had tried to carry on her ordinary life. You could see some of her clothes were hanging on a clothes line and she had a sort of a halo of clothes pegs around her head and she’d been shot as she was putting out her morning clothes for drying in the sun. And that’s when we were pretty frightened because we thought if these guys come here they’re not going to say “hands up” members of the national unit of journalists, they were going to kill us!

But we waited until they passed and then we walked on though the camp and you sort of lost any thought about fear, you didn’t think about courage, you just were so appalled at what had happened, and there was something propelling you, whatever the cost may be to go on looking. I walked over a mass grave that was bouncing under my feet, I climbed over corpses, and when I got back to my home my clothes were stinking of dead people. I hate clichés but it was a great turning point in my journalistic career because I remember saying I don’t care what the Israeli lobby may say, I don’t care what all the friends of Israel may say, this is a war crime and I’m going to write about it and I don’t care to hell what anyone says.

And that’s what Karsten (Norwegian journalist) and I did afterwards. We came out and we wrote our stories, and this is what it was like. I remember afterwards confronting an Israeli soldier who asked me what had happened and I said it looks like Treblinka in there, it looks like the pictures I’ve seen of the aftermath of the liberation of extermination camps in Europe. And I said to him, I’m sorry but that’s what it reminds me of. And as we know some Israelis who managed to see it said the same thing later on, they were appalled. And rightly so. And I thought then of course, I was a bit younger! I thought it would make a difference and it did for a while, it did, but then...

PK: The writing about them...

RF: Well no, the fact that we were there, there were witnesses by the thousand. I mean many people poured into the camps, they didn't clear the bodies for days, they were there getting larger and stinking in the heat.

I mean it was a horror show and we knew who'd done it and we knew who watched. You know the Christian Maronite allies of Israel had done it and the Israelis sent them in, armed them, fed them... The ground of the massacre site was littered with Israeli equipment which had been given to the Christian Lebanese militia who had done the killings.

PK: It wasn't my intention to ask you this but at an emotional level, a human level, what does that experience do to you?

RF: I think it's ridiculous for a journalist to talk about their experiences emotionally you know. We're talking about the massacre of people, we're talking about vast millions of refugees who are going through incredible human suffering and trying to keep their families alive. I think that if journalists are worried about their emotions you know they can fly home, business class if they like. I mean we don't count in this.

My feeling at the time was immense anger, and anger at Sharon who I've always believed was a war criminal and should have been tried. He almost was in Brussels but the Americans stopped that, of course, and every time I've been to Gaza since I've said this is Sabra and Shatila. It's not quite the same exactly although occasionally there were very clear parallels with massacres and of course, the Gaza wars when the Palestinians were killed they were killed directly by the Israelis; there was no militia involved. But I think Sabra and Shatila made me realise that if you want to report the truth go ahead whatever the flack you get around you, but for heaven's sake name the guilty parties.

PK: And Sharon subsequently became prime minister so what, knowing...

RF: Yeah, when he died he was called a peace-maker (laugh). That was Sharon's legacy. You're a bad guy and you turned him into a good guy.

And remember Arafat who at the time of Camp David, he was the peace-maker and he ended up as a super terrorist, having begun life as a terrorist in Beirut. He became a super peace-maker and went home to Palestine and ended up in the Muqata Compound in Ramallah as a super terrorist and couldn't even be buried in Jerusalem (laugh). It's amazing how you flip between being a good guy and a bad guy isn't it?

PK: Everyone we met in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon said: we will return, if not us, then the next generation in 100 years, 200 years.

RF: Yeah. Look I've sat in refugee camps. I remember being in Nahr el Bared in the North of Lebanon in 1976, and we're talking more than forty years ago now, and being told earnestly by this Palestinian family that well the crusaders were here for more than 100 years. We'll go back, maybe not us but our descendants eventually, and I don't think the world actually works like that now.

Some refugees go back if the west wants them to. The Kosovo Albanian Muslims went back to Kosovo, but if we're not really that concerned... Do you think the Rohingyas are going to go back to Myanmar? I doubt it. Certainly, the Germans who were thrown out of Prussia, and eastern Germany, not without good reason in political terms, will never go back. It's now part of Poland. The German Sudetens will never go back, because their ancestors played a role in Hitler's takeover of Czechoslovakia. And look at all the Jews, some of whom ended up in Israel, others in America who would never go back and in many cases wouldn't want to go back to their original homes in Europe. Refugees by and large don't go home and I was quite shocked once when I was doing a story about Syrian refugees in Lebanon to learn from the UN, not UN reports, but the actual UN people on the ground,

both Western and Lebanese, that on average a third of refugees never leave the country they take refuge in.

That was a figure I constantly remembered when the million refugees, allegedly a million whatever they were, arrived in Europe across the Mediterranean in 2015, and across the sea from Turkey. You know refugees have a habit once they establish any kind of roots to stay where they are, and you can place your trust in international institutions - the UN, the EU, The World Trade Organisation, UN Health Bodies - but in the end it won't get you home, and you can say well "I'll fight for it", yes but how? The 1948 war has been over a long time. I find it more and more difficult, you know you can find them and you've found them, but it's more and more difficult to find Palestinians who are survivors of the *Nakba*, the "disaster" in Arabic, which happened in 1948/49.

PK: So, seventy years later, four generations later and they're stuck in Shatila and...

RF: Well no, what's happening in fact and this is going to happen with the Syrians over the years, Syrian Palestinians I'm talking about, and Syrian refugees themselves, is that slowly but surely through family members abroad in Australia, Canada, America, family members are leaving. So that in a sense their dispossession is finally being resolved in Israel's favour because they're not going to go home to Palestine, are they? They're going to England, France, Canada, America, Australia, New Zealand.

And I reckon and I'm talking about Palestine NGOs who I see regularly in Beirut, that if there were 360,000 Palestinian refugees it could now be as low as 140,000 – 160,000. Now some of those refugees have gone to Syria and have not come back again and, of course, there are Syrian Palestinian refugees who have arrived in Lebanon, but I think probably over a period of hundreds of years one might see a possibility that all these refugee communities outside what was Palestine - obviously the refugee camps in the

West Bank, Gaza is a vast refugee camp - but Palestinians who fled to Syria and Lebanon, the families originally from the 1948/49 war, they will gradually emigrate to other parts of the world and thus will disappear as a Palestinian community.

The problem for the Israelis is the Palestinians who remain in Mandate Palestine, and for them, you see if the Israeli government is to be regarded as the representative of the Israeli People, the Israelis want their land and they are taking it. We call it settlements, they're colonies, a Jewish colonisation project, they're building homes for Jews and Jews only on Arab land across areas of the West Bank and they're not going to give it back and they don't intend to give it back and, therefore, there will not be a Palestine State.

PK: All the documents and other evidence the Palestinian refugees have of their previous lives, the keys to the doors, the deeds to the houses, the maps of their land, none of these are of any value?

RF: Well, do you think after the Protestant dispossession of the Catholics in the east of Ireland that Catholics who came to the gates of Protestant houses, some of them with very, very old documentation showing land ownership, do you think it got them home? I don't think it did, did it?

Once you have an occupying power and that occupying power starts to build colonies, that tends to be the end. You can see in some cases it hasn't worked out like that, the French in Algeria for example, that was a colonial project that didn't work. But in Israel/Palestine whatever you want to call this entity which you can call Palestine or greater Israel or smaller Israel, the Israelis are building and taking the land and Palestinians are losing the land.

I reckon that of the 22% of Palestine that's left to the Arabs they have probably already lost at least 10% so they don't have much, and the Palestinians in Lebanon who in theory have some kind of notion of returning,

they're not going to have any room for them in what's left of the Palestinian State.

PK: And the deeds and keys etc?

RF: They will be kept in a museum (such as the Museum of Memories in Shatila Camp, Lebanon) which I visited several times and there they will remain in a museum. And one day like the Armenians who were dispossessed from their homes in the great genocide of 1915; they actually suffered a holocaust which the Palestinians did not, in the scale of World War Two, but in World War One. The Armenians were driven from their homelands; a million and a half were massacred by the Turks and they have never gone home. There is a little state there called Armenia but they've never gone back to their homes and now what do they have? You can meet their rich communities in Boston, and they have a museum and in the museums are little items from the homes that their great, great, grandfathers had in what is now Turkish Anatolia, eastern Turkey. It will be the same.

PK: Jared Kushner?

RF: A supporter of Jewish colonisation, yes absolutely.

PK: But he's talking about a "deal of the century", we don't really know.

RF: It's such a good deal we can't find out what it is, yeah!

PK: Just so obviously we don't know the details.

RF: Well we know, we clearly know that the attempt to destroy UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency – the UN agency for Palestinian refugees), the only major international institution that looks after Palestinian refugees, the idea is to crush it by withdrawing all money from it which the Americans have done.

The Trump regime as I call it is anxious to ensure that the only Palestinian refugees recognised will be the original refugees now in their eighties or nineties, or seventies perhaps, who fled Palestine. That their children and their children's children and their great grand-children cannot be called refugees. Well what are they going to be called? Lebanese, no. Syrian, certainly not. Greeks, maybe one day. Americans? Canadians? Remember that the idea of taking over the West Bank which is what the Israelis are doing in their massive settlement, colonial project, is to destroy the notion of Palestine as an entity. Forget about state or nation, as an entity. I questioned Amira Hass, one of the finest Israeli Journalists, a friend of mine, some time ago about this. I said what is to become of the Palestinians and she said really "Robert I don't know but they won't leave, will they"?

So how do you get the Palestinians to leave what's left of Palestine. All the Palestinians in the Lebanon can do is watch.

PK: Helplessly?

RF: Sorry?

PK: Helplessly?

RF: Well I suppose they can send a fraternal delegation to international institutions (laugh). No I mean there are a number of very wise and well-educated Palestinians in Beirut who still try to ameliorate Lebanese law which is deliberately constructed against Palestinian settlement of any kind, for demographic reasons but also because, for example, they don't want any kind of settlement. If a Palestinian by chance owns property in Lebanon he cannot pass it on to his Palestinian family, he's got to sell it, and it cannot be sold to Palestinians.

So this dispossession, having originally happened seven decades ago is now still every day happening in Lebanon when the few refugees who had properties are losing them in Lebanon, the dispossession continues. And if

you want to erase a people, Palestine Arabs, that's how you do it. You make them go even further away.

PK: And is that your sense of what's going to happen in the future?

RF: Well you see

PK: Will it be wiped out?

RF: Look it's a question you have to put to the Israelis. Do they want to live in an internationally recognised, which they have, and internationally respected, which they don't have, state called Israel, which lives in peace with its neighbours, including the state of Palestine all be it that's only 22% of the original Palestine? Or do they want effectively to have a greater Israel, all the way to the Jordan river, in which case they'll have a big Israel but they won't have a democracy because if they want a democracy they've got to give a vote to all the Arab inhabitants, and if they do that it won't be Israel anymore, so it's do you want the land or do you want democracy, and it's Israelis who make that decision.

And the Americans won't do it for them because the Americans will do what they're told by the Israelis and we all know the reasons for that and that's a different story and a different movie, but you know you will find very courageous not necessarily Israeli Jews, but Jewish communities particularly in America, and Israelis Jews who speak up for the Palestinians and say there is no future for our Jewish people in an Israel which is a colonising state. There is no future for a free and democratic Israel in that kind of land, but if you look at the Jared Kushner's of this world, if you look at the Trumps, if you look at the Israeli government of people like Avigdor Lieberman who frankly is a fascist, these people are not open to that argument, they want the land and my view is they'll get it one way or the other.

PK: So to conclude then Robert, is your sense that the state of Israel is there to stay?

RF: I thought that Yugoslavia was there to stay. (laugh).

Until I paid a visit and realised it wasn't true. No, I go to Israel, I fly into Tel Aviv Airport, and you know it looks a very modern State, not only is its economy extraordinary, not only is it state-of-the-art computer science, a remarkable achievement for the Israeli people, the Jewish people of Israel whichever you know definition you want, and when I go to Israel, you see, I automatically go to left-wing Israelis, or liberal Israelis, or former members of the Labour Party or perhaps just, you know, activists who want to see a liberal, democratic Israel within more or less the original boundaries of Israel, and they want Palestine to have a state.

And when you've been to see five or six of these people and you've had coffee with them, Israeli men and women, some of whom of course are dying out now, the years go by for them too, you can say well ok well maybe this is the Israel, I could believe it and would like to believe it, you know Israel has a right to exist, etc, etc. But then I get on the bus from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and the people on the bus don't want to speak or think about the Palestinians. They would like them to go away. And these are the people who elect the government, and the problem is, you see, when you have a State that still doesn't have a border, where is the eastern border of Israel, is it in Jerusalem, is it east of Jerusalem, is it on the Jordan river, or beyond? I mean when Israel says, you know, does Israel have a right to exist, I always say well show me the borders.

If the borders of Israel do not include the West Bank, yes - but if it includes the West Bank including Ramallah, Jericho, Hebron, then I don't think that country has the legal right to exist, it doesn't exist, it's not accepted internationally as that. If the United Kingdom says, you know, do we have a right to exist and our territory includes Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England, I say yes, sure, but if the map of the United Kingdom includes the Republic of Ireland and shows Cork and Dublin as British cities I say no, it does not have a right to that existence.

PK: So, it's a question I ask pretty much everybody and I'm sure you've been asked this several times, do you recognise the State of Israel?

RF: I just told you – it has a right to exist.

It's all about the borders. When the Israelis can show me, when I can sit down with an Israeli foreign ministry official, as I often do when I go to Jerusalem and say show me the eastern border, when you show me the actual borders of Israel, then I can tell you whether I think that's the Israel that exists or not.

PK: But.....

RF: Israel does exist as a state and internationally it is recognised as such within the original borders of the Israeli state as recognised by the UN, by foreign governments and so on. But if it then says the West Bank belongs to us and these vast Israeli colonisation projects are part of Israel, I'm sorry that is not the Israel that exists on anybody's map except the Israelis.

PK: And in the context...

RF: They haven't been decided, it not clarified, no one is asking anyone to make them clear, they're not there.

According, if you look at Israeli maps, you will not find that border marked as an international frontier, until it is who are we to try and answer the question, does Israel exist? It does clearly, and does it have a right to exist – yes. The UN gave it the right to exist. The UN voted for the state of Israel. It may not have been just to the Arabs that that happened but it is legal. But when you then say "oh but Israel also includes the following territories", well hang on a minute, you know.

I mean if the British decided to revoke the treaty and came back and sent the British Army into the Republic of Ireland and say well we haven't

quite decided the borders yet, does the United Kingdom have a right to exist in these circumstances. It raises very serious questions. It's for the Israelis to decide if they exist, not me.

PK: And then in that context then you know the much debated one state, two state solution?

RF: Ah it's gone beyond it, there won't be a two-state solution. There will not be a one state if by that you mean a democratic state including the Arabs, and the two-state solution is finished. If you go to the West Bank it's impossible, if Israel is going to keep these vast areas of lands for their own people, not for Arabs, then it will not be, there cannot be a viable, let alone a secure Palestine state. It's not going to happen and we haven't even mentioned Gaza.

In Mandate Palestine as it was ruled by the British, they had their own Palestinian stamps, they had Palestinian pound notes, with one Palestine pound written on it in Arabic, Hebrew and English and they had a Palestinian administration. Palestine as a State did exist as a working entity under the British. It was a floating State in the sense that the British were bound by promises to ensure there was going to be a Jewish homeland which in effect meant a State there and were also bound by that same promise to make sure there wasn't going to be an Arab State inside the Israeli State or homeland. But of course, you know many of these promises, in fact many of the peace treaties that we are suffering from today were made in a time of war when you can't actually make peace treaties, and in the First World War I don't – there were British politicians in the First World War who said what are we sowing in Palestine, what are we sowing in the Middle East when this First World War is over, they spotted that there was going to be a problem.

Lloyd George spoke in parliament about this in the 1920s and 1930s about what had happened and how the British never thought what they were

giving birth to in terms of war and bloodshed, pain and suffering in the Middle East.

PK: You say that the Palestinians are never going back and most likely over generations will emigrate all around the world. In the meantime, there are a lot of young people within the camps and it's very hard to get work, very hard to get education. What's their life going to be like into the future - do they sit there and wait and wait until they are old men and old women?

RF: Well I mean you're talking specifically about Lebanon, now before the war in Syria Palestinians had a much easier life in Syria than they did in Lebanon; they could own properties, they had Syrian passports, they could be Syrian citizens. I suppose that some of these young people will hope that a new Syria will in some way emerge from the devastation of the 2011 war, 2011 to the present, that they might go and live there, but you see at the end of the day it's very difficult to make a whole people move to another country and not demand that their country is going to be there and the Syrians do not want a Palestinian state in Syria.

You have Palestinians living there like you have Armenians in Beirut, the Armenians are refugees who actually have seats in parliament, and they are Lebanese but they are not of such numbers as to threaten the demographic balance in Lebanon. You know they are Christians too which means that the Christians would not be against the Armenians. I think the real problem is that refugeedom and I think the Balfour Declaration was a hand-book for refugeedom, it is intended to dispossess the Arab Muslims in Palestine, and that was its purpose at the end of the day.

It certainly achieved it whether it was its purpose or not and I think that the problem is that we create refugees very quickly wherever they are in the world, and we then think ok now they've got camps, they can be fed, they can be educated, pitifully, but they can be educated, and they are not being

massacred, except on rare occasions, it's over, and then we westerners look around for more refugee communities to protect you see.

But the idea that they have rights, national rights as well as human rights, i.e. to live without being murdered, or to eat or whatever, we don't go that far, we don't see that, that's for the diplomats, that's for the statesmen or the politicians, and the United Nations - and that will do them no good. And by and large refugee populations do not go home, unless there is a specific international mandate militarily to ensure that they do. The west did that in Kosovo, but they did not do that in Bosnia. If you go to Bosnia and, I've just been there again, the front lines are still there as the war ended.

PK: But even if they don't go home, don't they still retain the right to go home?

RF: On whose laws? The problem is, you see, that it's all very well to say we have the right to return, that's where I was born, that's where my parents come from, that's where my grand-parents come from. Fine, but how far back does it go, time continues, does time, does the right to return finish when the original refugees are all dead?

RF: Do we switch homelands off? Do we switch events off from having effects?

Because every Armenian genocide victim is now dead. I met a lot of them but they're all dead now, does that switch off the right for the Armenians if they wanted to say I'd like to go back to where my grandparents lived? You know do we stop recognising the great epic suffering of peoples because there's no survivors left? Do we start allowing people to deny the Jewish holocaust because soon there will be no survivors of the Jewish holocaust left? You know there is an integrity to memory, not just national rights, but memory, and there was a place called Palestine, and that is the problem for the Israelis and for the world - there was a place called Palestine.

PK: And do you have an answer to those questions?

RF: No. No. I've no answers.

PK: So, we live with the question.

RF: I report it. (laugh). I'm not a solver of political problems. All you can do as a journalist is to tell people so they can never say we didn't know. They might forget, but they can't say they weren't told.

PK: So, you're not into prescription.

RF: No, I have lots of colleagues who probably are. No, I can say what might not work and I could probably say what will happen. No, because we live in this sort of easy happy clappy internet world we look for solutions, two plus two equals four, normally, but there aren't solutions to these great questions of history, there may be settlements but there aren't solutions.

PK: And there's no solution to the Palestinian situation?

RF: What is it?

One state, two state solution is fantasy now, two states is not going to happen and one state because it can't. I don't know, it's an untold tragedy which will continue long after we're gone from the world, and all the survivors will be memories too. I don't know the answer, I really don't. I think about it of course. I'm writing now in my new book at the moment, I'm writing a section on Palestine and Israel itself and it's three chapters, and I'm just reaching the end of the third chapter and I'm looking at two features that happened and it's not really in the remit of your film – one was the International UN enquiry into what happened in the Gaza war of 2008-09, and Judge Richard Goldstone a fine man, effectively said that Israel committed war crimes and he then recanted under great family pressure. I think that was a great betrayal of the Palestinians who told of their suffering to him, and

at the same time, where my chapter ends is about a Palestine doctor who lost his three daughters in the shelling of Gaza in 2008-09 – one of their heads was cut off in front of him, she was decapitated by a shell, and he made his future in Canada running charitable medical institutions for both Jews and Arabs in Palestine. So you have this immensely powerful figure of Goldstone who betrayed the Palestinians even though he is....., and I knew him very well because I interviewed him at great lengths about Bosnia, and the war crimes in Bosnia when he was a Judge in the International Tribunal for Bosnia, and he betrayed those people, and the Palestinian who lost his family did not betray his people, but he didn't betray the Israelis either because he speaks fluent Hebrew and he was a doctor in an Israeli hospital. What lesson do you learn from that?

PK: On that note, thank you very much.

RF: You are welcome.

Robert Fisk is *The Independent's* multi-award-winning Middle-East correspondent, based in Beirut. He has lived in the Arab world for more than 40 years, covering the war in Syria and Lebanon, five Israeli invasions, the Iran-Iraq war, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Algerian civil war, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, the Bosnian and Kosovo wars, the American invasion and occupation of Iraq and the 2011 Arab revolutions. He holds numerous British and international journalism awards, including the Press Awards Foreign Reporter of the Year seven times. His books include *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle-East* (Fourth Estate, 2005).

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